

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS TEGUCIGALPA 001109

SIPDIS

STATE FOR DRL/IL, WHA/CEN, AND WHA/PPC

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [EAGR](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF HISTORIC BANANA STRIKE IN HONDURAS

1. Summary: A series of events sponsored by the Ministry of Labor and the International Labor Organization (ILO) took place from May 3-5 in Tegucigalpa to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the historic May 1954 banana strike in Honduras. President Ricardo Maduro, President of the National Congress Pepe Lobo, Minister of Labor German Leitzelar Vidaurreta, DCM, AID Director, and LabAtt attended the opening commemoration, along with several 1954 banana strikers, as well as leaders from labor unions and the private sector. End Summary.

Background

2. The 1954 strike began at United Fruit Company (Tela Railroad Company/Chiquita) and quickly spread to Standard Fruit Company (Dole) and then across the country before being resolved in July 1954. It would mark the beginning of a labor union movement and organized working class in Honduras. On May 1, 1954, workers from United Fruit went on strike after demanding double pay for working holidays. Two days later, 7,000 workers went on strike at installations in El Progreso, Yoro. The strike continued among banana companies, a tobacco plant, a mining company, and some textile factories.

3. Rafael Alberty, a teacher who went to work for United Fruit as office manager of the machinery department, became one of the negotiators in the strike on behalf of workers. He and Ventura Ramos, among others, had received orientation on strike movements in Guatemala during the Jacobo Arbenz government and allegations of outside influence were circulating. (Comment: A Guatemalan group that entered Guatemala from Honduras overthrew the Arbenz government in June 1954. End Comment.)

4. Before any mediation was able to take place, some 2,000 workers extended the movement to Cortes. Shortly thereafter, the numbers of workers on strike reached 12,000. In response, Standard Fruit, unlike United Fruit, negotiated with workers under governmental arbitration. These negotiations would be the first of its kind in Honduran history. After 67 days on strike, the workers, the government, and United Fruit reached an agreement that ended the strike in early July.

5. As a result of the banana strike, the Letter for Worker Guarantees of 1955 established the application of the Labor Law, the creation of the Ministry of Labor, the establishment of the Honduran Institute for Social Security (IHSS), and the Agrarian Reform Law. In addition, on August 28, 1954, the Tela Railroad Company Workers Union (SITRATERCO) was formed, one of the most powerful and influential unions of the past 50 years. Today, it is down to approximately 2,000 members and is part of the United Confederation of Honduran Workers (CUTH) led by Israel Salinas.

50th Anniversary Commemoration

6. On May 3, 2004, the commemoration began with opening remarks from President Ricardo Maduro, Minister of Labor German Leitzelar, a representative of ILO, as well as Honduran Workers Federation (CTH) Secretary General Dinora Aceituno. Following these remarks, recognition was awarded to several aging leaders of the 1954 banana strike. A forum followed that mainly addressed the need to reform certain aspects of Honduran labor law. In addition to this forum, a number of conferences were held during the week to address international norms, social responsibility, child labor, and the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

7. During the forum, the Minister of Labor Leitzelar expounded his views on modernizing Honduran labor law in certain areas. Leitzelar also spoke of the need to effectively enforce existing laws. Supreme Court Justice Lidia Cardona argued that instead of using the courts to settle labor concerns, mediation should be utilized as a mechanism for conciliation. President of the Honduran Manufacturing Association (Honduran Maquila Association) Jesus Canahuati and President of the National Congress Pepe Lobo reiterated Leitzelar's concerns about the inefficiency of current labor law. In response, workers complained about the constraints to the effective freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Pierce